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## **Dominican-American Auto-ethnographies: Considering the Boundaries of Self-Representation in Julia Álvarez and Junot Díaz<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article explores some of the dilemmas faced by minority autobiographers when they set out to represent their life stories in writing. While significant benefits may be derived from this self-conscious enterprise, bicultural authors are sometimes unaware of the boundaries -or frames- that the mainstream culture demarcates for their self-portrayals. My analysis of Julia Álvarez's *Yo!* (1997) and Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996), which could both be characterized as 'auto-ethnographies,' shows how these two Dominican-American writers are subject to some of the principles and rules that have governed the genre since its very inception in the United States. Due to the kind of subjectivities and selfhoods they aspire to develop and represent in their works, and to their readers' expectations, they are seen to deploy certain patterns and narrative techniques that can hardly be considered new or original in self-writing. Although it should be admitted that these bicultural writers have expanded the boundaries of the autobiographical genre, this article also demonstrates that these authors are dependent on a number of 'utopian blueprints,' divided forms of subjectivity, and conventional strategies of cultural critique that were integral to the works of the 'forefathers' of the genre in the New World.

I write to find out what I'm thinking. I write to find out who I am. I write to understand things. Of course there's an edge, especially once you're doing it professionally. You realize that you've got readers who are along with you on the voyage of trying to understand things. So you also feel a responsibility to them (Julia Álvarez, in "The Politics of Fiction")

You come to the United States and the United States begins immediately, systematically, to erase you in every way, to suppress those things which it considers not digestible. You spend a lot of time being colonized. Then, if you've got the opportunity and the breathing space and the guidance, you immediately -when you realize it- begin to decolonize yourself. And in that process, you relearn names for yourself that you had forgotten. (Junot Díaz, in "Fiction is the Poor Man's Cinema")

## Introduction

The two statements above by Dominican-American authors Julia Álvarez and Junot Díaz may easily be read as evidence of the serious dilemmas that ethnic minority writers come up against every time they initiate that painstaking process of cultural assertion and individual self-realization that reflecting on their hybrid past inevitably entails. A great deal has been written recently about the substantial benefits that these writers may obtain if they manage to hit a balance in their work between their need, on the one hand, to keep their particular cultural heritage alive and, on the other, to provide their art with a worthy purpose. Couser (1979: 209) already noted that analyses of these texts should take into consideration not only their "distinctive minority subcultures" but also their connection with the culture in the receiving country. In most instances, criticism of bicultural self-writing has come to the conclusion that "autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition" (Anderson, 2001: 104). Even though it is irrefutable that ethnic writers may find in self-writing that privileged "theatre of difference" where they can dwell in detail upon the causes and nature of their liminal condition and stake the reasons for the affirmation of a collective identity different from the dominant one, it is also clear that this politicization of the writing subject is not without its problems. There are two main obstacles that may interfere with the achievement of these goals. First of all, as the two epigraphs above indicate, no ethnic writer can be said to produce their work "*in vacuo*" -that is, they are aware of a tradition and a reading public that will invariably curtail their freedom to deal with the issues and to express themselves as they please. Secondly, and most importantly perhaps, no matter how liminal and distinct they may feel, they are still subject to the restrictions of language and discourse that are part and parcel of the writing process -ethnic or otherwise- and that, consequently, constrain the possibility of a fully original and idiosyncratic self-expression.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, in spite of the many efforts to romanticize minority self-writing by contending that it provides the subaltern with new ways of integrating into a society on the basis of "the assertion of a 'personal' voice, which speaks beyond itself" (Swindells, 1995: 7), it should also be admitted that these opinions often distort the real conditions of the autobiographical contract. As is the case with most other contracts, this one also seeks a number of gains which, naturally, will only materialize if one is willing to take upon oneself some duties and responsibilities that are an integral part of the deal.<sup>3</sup> The main aim of this article is to explore the impact that those implicit obligations have on the work of two Dominican-American

authors, since one has the impression that ethnic artists often are not fully aware of the kind of boundaries -or frames- within which they are expected to represent their experiences. Even so the traumatic memories and fractured identities in their fictional works offer fertile ground in which the literary scholar can scrutinize the choices they feel compelled to make in order to produce a viable subjectivity for themselves. Of course, these decisions not only affect their position regarding their past and their mostly trying experiences during the transition into an utterly different culture, but as Staub (1991: 65) rightly remarks, ethnic self-writing habitually “reveals the inner contradictions within individuals as they seek to understand their relationship to family heritage, ethnic community, ethnic mythology, and the United States society.”

The discussion below will study the complications that arise when one carries out a close examination of the conventions of self-representation that problematize our perception of bicultural narratives as successful reflections of a desire to constitute a full-fledged subjectivity. Before I consider those complications, though, I will explain very succinctly why I have chosen Julia Álvarez's *¡Yo!* and Junot Díaz's *Drown* as the main objects of my analysis, and to what extent the views expounded here may be equally useful in the study of other ethnic minority writers. One of the main reasons for my choice of Díaz's and Álvarez's fictional self-narratives is that both of them have been acclaimed as highly representative voices among a generation of minority artists who are trying to reconcile their indebtedness to their original culture with their own personal ambitions.<sup>4</sup> By now, detailed academic studies comparing their fictional works to those of Arturo Islas and Piri Thomas, and Cristina García and Esmeralda Santiago, respectively, are plentiful,<sup>5</sup> even though these authors -or their parents- came to the U.S. from different countries and their motives for leaving their motherlands were often disparate. Despite this diversity, as Kevane explains in the introduction to *Latina Self-Portraits*, all these writers share the need to find ways in which to give shape to their highly personal experiences: “[...] by incorporating a combination of different styles, all these writers extend their modern works combining formal aspects of prose writing with testimonial and personal experience” (Kevane and Heredia, 2000: 10).

What is most interesting, I think, in this general description of recent Latino/a literature is the emphasis placed on the personal and the experiential component as a necessary platform from which the fictional and the collective may then be constructed. Although it is true that works such as *Drown* (1996) and *¡Yo!* (1997) include all kinds of interesting views on transculturation, ethnic discrimination, sexual disorientation, women's subjugation, and family tensions, it is the “I” that -either as a narrating voice or as narrated by others- stands at the very heart of the texts that immediately catches the reader's attention. Both writers have explained their “fixation” with the bicultural “I” -embodied, respectively, in the characters of Yúnior de las Casas and Yolanda García in each of these works- by maintaining that, since they stand at the crossroads of two different cultures, they have inevitably become the victims of a great deal of pain and confusion. Interestingly, the authors allege that these disturbing emotions find their way into their writing. In this regard, Álvarez remarks that “my eye sees certain things because I'm that mixture. And the things that I see, that I'm caught by, are what I'll write about. I think a lot of the way I see the world has to do with being a combination, feeling slightly marginal in each place” (Rosario-Sievert, 1997: 36).

### **Bicultural Subjectivities and their Tribulations**

Whereas Díaz tends to look upon his hyphenated condition in a more uncertain light, Álvarez has always thought that, despite the marginality that she may have occasionally felt as an exile, the ethnic writer should take pride and celebrate this “doubleness.” Her novels often bring to the foreground her hybrid condition and become a true exultation of bicultural subjectivity (Cf. Alonso, 2000: 136-37). As noted earlier, however, it is not easy to determine the extent to which these minority self-writers are succeeding in re-drawing the boundaries -or frames- of identity and signification that the dominant culture has demarcated for them. I would argue that, while it should be acknowledged that ethnic minority authors are stretching those boundaries by rearranging the dominant discourse and the ideology that is therein encoded, they still have not been completely successful in transcending some of the patterns to be found in traditional self-narratives. Couser’s (1979: 210) seminal work on bicultural autobiography demonstrates that, even if it is apparent that these texts “recount lives that originated in distinctive minority subcultures,” it would be an analytical blunder to assume “that they ended there,” for they invariably enter into an “active exchange” with the mainstream tradition.<sup>6</sup> In the pages that follow, it will become evident that despite conspicuous differences in the extent of the attention and respect paid to the canonical works of the genre, bicultural self-writers in the U.S. seem to be compelled to produce their narratives under the shadow or against the grain of the models established by the “Founding Fathers” of American autobiography. Obviously, there will be aspects of their ethnic heritage and of the position they occupy in the host society that will set their work apart from that of those father figures but, even so, it seems undeniable that these earlier self-writers presence can still be deeply felt in their own writing.<sup>7</sup>

In order to visualize the kind of challenges met by ethnic self-writers when they decide to present their life experiences in a fictional text, it is all-important to realize what their main objectives are at the outset of the project. In principle, there are two ingredients that are deemed essential if one really aspires to obtain the self-knowledge and public recognition that loom at the end of that process. On the one hand, minority self-writers are expected to incorporate into their work a significant part of the “cultural baggage” that they have brought over from their country of origin. Countless specialists have pointed out that it is the development of a more relational and collective ethnic consciousness that sets these experiments apart from more traditional self-narratives.<sup>8</sup> Or, as Payne (1991: xxvi) prefers to put it, all ethnic self-narratives “reveal a strong interest in cultural interrelationships between personal stories and collective and public history.” The two fictional works under analysis here can be observed to fulfill this prerequisite, since references to the protagonists’ childhood memories of the local customs on the island, the squalid living conditions, and Trujillo’s dictatorship together with the consequences it had for many families, are abundant. Indeed, several scholars have gone so far as to claim that the main purpose of these auto-ethnographic narratives<sup>9</sup> -like those of Thomas or García- is “to defy any possible loss or extinction of their ethnicity” (Alonso 2000: 136). On the other hand, a second element, which is also believed to be vital in bicultural self-writing, is the attempt to leave behind such common features as the emphasis on individualism, the references to a metaphysical self or the key importance of

authorship.<sup>10</sup> Because ethnic writers are heirs to some of the destabilizing views held by postmodernist poetics, they are often seen to subvert some of the principles that had guided their predecessors' self-representations. Among those principles, the following seem particularly central: teleological conceptions of selfhood, linearity in the exposition of life events, and single voice or point of view to relate one's experiences. Both *¡Yo!* and *Drown* can be said to display a high degree of the tentativeness so characteristic of contemporary auto-ethnographies.<sup>11</sup> The former, for example, brings together a variety of voices and viewpoints of people in the D.R. and the U.S., all of whom contribute with their idiosyncratic brushstrokes to the portrayal of Yolanda García -Álvarez's fictional *alter ego*-. As the author herself explained in an interview with Heredia,

In *¡Yo!* I took the point of view away from the traditional aristocrat, the artist. I gave it to the "little people" who surround the artist, who tell you they are not creative, not storytellers. But these people, who do not consider themselves artistic, tell stories. (2000: 26)

*Drown*, on the other hand, comprises a collection of ten brief vignettes in which Díaz makes use of an intentionally loose, almost peripatetic writing style to capture the multi-layered and intricate experiences that the process of cultural translation involves. The ten sketches are interrelated, since they repeatedly go back to a number of incidents in the de las Casas family history as they make their transit from the capital city of the Dominican Republic, Santo Domingo, to their Quisqueya neighborhood in New Jersey. The book proves extremely fragmented in structure because it follows the sometimes unassimilated and other times hyper-naturalistic memories of its protagonist, Yuniór -Díaz's "second self"-, as he discovers the troubled psyches and experiences of his closest kin and friends, most of whom are victims of some form of exclusion. Rather than following a lineal chronology or portraying a progressive maturation of the main character towards a better understanding of himself and those around him,<sup>12</sup> the book presents a random and incomplete choice of snapshots of his early experiences on the island and, later on, in Washington Heights, New Jersey. As Díaz himself noted in an interview, *Drown* should not be read as a literary work in the tradition of the immigrant narrative (Arce, 2003: 45); instead, his writing should be seen as a radical reaction to a number of labels and categorizations that he fears would straitjacket him in ethnic or pseudo-patriotic projects which are utterly foreign to his own ambitions:

The first thing that would be helpful is that I never was a good Dominican. I would never get an "A" in Dominican-ness [...] The Dominican nation when it visualizes itself it doesn't consider people like my parents central to the experience of the Dominican Republic, a bunch of poor *campesinos* who were the kind of people that everybody was warned not to be. (Arce, 2003: 44)

Frydman (2007: 272) has likewise stressed that "*Drown* does not rehearse the conventional immigrant narrative," with its attendant anxieties about the loss of one's cultural heritage and the constant fear of being assimilated into the dominant society. Not unlike the protagonist of Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango St.*, in fact, the narrator seems much more concerned with those puzzling intersections between class, sexuality and color that repeatedly prevent him from securing a firm footing in the host country. Considering all these

original deviations from more orthodox self-writing, it would seem difficult to discern features in these two fictionalized auto-ethnographies that would make them, at the same time, subversive introspections into bicultural identities and fairly predictable exercises in the art of endowing oneself with an appropriate public image. Still, as will be demonstrated below, there are a number of narrative techniques and rhetorical devices that are clearly reminiscent of the patterns that we are already familiar with in the classics of the genre.

### Utopian Blueprints for a Selfhood

In his book *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography*, Karl Weintraub (1978: xii) contended that self-writing “takes utterly seriously the important juncture of time, and place, and cultural atmosphere, and men’s [and women’s] own wills; it makes history a truly important form of knowledge”. For this learned historian, since the publication of some widely-read secular and historical autobiographies in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, self-writers stopped creating life representations that would be solely concerned with the singularity of the individual.<sup>13</sup> Instead, modern autobiographers have paid attention to the multiplicity of roles encompassed by the social position they occupied and how those roles were differently inflected at different points of their lives. In his thorough study, Weintraub (1978: 378) reaches the insightful conclusion that

Since self-conceptions are rarely detached from men’s [and women’s, again] vision of the desired society, it would be a major task to trace the modern fate of individuality in a world where so many seem to feel the urge to create and to proclaim their own utopian blueprints.

Although it must be admitted that some contemporary self-narratives would make some of this scholar’s observations on the genre sound outdated -especially, on the issue of what the most appropriate structures would be-, it is also evident that his ideas about the claims made by variegated “callings” to the autobiographical self are still highly relevant. The “vision of the desired society” that Weintraub recurrently refers to is ostensibly present in self-writings such as Franklin’s or Rousseau’s, but it may be observed to gain special relevance in the writings of bicultural writers whose commitment to some “utopian blueprints” seems even more compelling. Álvarez’s *¡Yo!* is fraught with examples illustrating her belief in the possibility of finding a balance in her selfhood between her Dominican roots and the U.S. culture that later adopted her.<sup>14</sup> In order to represent this process of “biculturation,” however, she needs to retrieve a number of memories from her early years that will permit her somehow to achieve that balance. Despite the fact that she was barely ten years old when her family had to abandon the island, so that the reader would expect those memories to be rather vague and imprecise, Álvarez’s reminiscences prove extremely vivid and detailed. We would not need to stretch our imagination too much to conclude that what the writer is offering us here, is a heavily mediated re-construction of those incidents rather than a meticulous portrayal of her experiences as a girl. In line with Sidonie Smith’s (1987: 45) views on these retrospective exercises,

[...] memory is ultimately a story about, and thus a discourse on, original experience, so that recovering the past is not hypostatizing of fixed grounds and absolute origins but, rather, an interpretation of earlier experience that can never be divorced from the filterings of subsequent experience or articulated outside the structures of language and storytelling.

What seems particularly original in this revised conceptualization of memory, and most *á propos* for our analysis of Álvarez's and Díaz's literary works, is the great importance granted to the writers' ideological standpoints and their specific use of the language to convey those ideas in convenient ways.

It could logically be argued that, in the case of *¡Yo!* and *Drown*, instead of merely recalling some episodes from their early life in the D.R., Álvarez and Díaz are inventing themselves as individuals in transition whose interests are equally divided between their country of origin and the receiving society. Regarding this process of inventing one's ethnicity, Sollors (1989: xvi) has pointed out that "it is the specificity of power relations at a given historical moment and in a particular place that triggers off a strategy of pseudo-historical explanations that camouflage the inventive act itself." As a matter of fact, should the reader lose sight of those "power relations" and the constant debate going on in the U.S. on ethnic and minority issues,<sup>15</sup> some of the events that both authors choose to include in their fictional auto-ethnographies would seem quite forced and unconvincing. The representation they make of their Dominican experiences is characterized by the inflation and deflation of all kinds of referents -from customs and behaviors to characters-, which eventually force readers to wonder whether they are intent on depicting the children they were or the self-conscious writers they have become. A number of critics have rightly noted that the tendency among ethnic writers to have their life stories "doubled" through all kinds of hyperbolic and meiotic devices is meant to enhance their divided -and almost schizophrenic- selves.<sup>16</sup> Buss (1991: 98), for one, maintains about this phenomenon that "these extremes -an inflated self, worshipped, separate, and a self so lacking in substance, so vulnerable that it cannot hold the parts of its being together- illustrate the two versions of subjectivity that contend with one another in these autobiographies." These two subjectivities are easily detected in Díaz's account of some of his traumatic childhood experiences in Santo Domingo when he, his elder brother, Rafa, and his mother barely managed to make ends meet, while their Papi (father) was living in the U.S. for a number of years:

I lived without a father for the first nine years of my life. He was in the States, working, and the only way I knew him was through the photographs my moms kept in a plastic sandwich bag under her bed. Since our zinc roof leaked almost everything we owned was water stained: our clothes, Mami's Bible, her make-up, whatever food we had, Abuelo's tools, even our cheap wooden furniture. It was only because of that plastic bag that any pictures of my father survived. (p. 53)

The stories set in the D.R. ("Ysrael," "Aguantando," and "No Face") tell us of the difficult period right before the de las Casas offspring and their mother left for the U.S. to join their father on the mainland. We also learn in them about the terrible cruelty of socially disadvantaged children towards others who have fared even worse than they have -such as Ysrael, whose face was eaten off by a pig when he was just a baby. Yunior, who proves a

much more sensitive and sympathetic boy than his elder brother, experiences much pain and distress when he sees the poor masked child running away from the others, and his own mother almost unable to cope with a situation imposed on her by a frustratingly deprived environment and her absent husband. His emotionally vulnerable condition reaches a crisis when his father breaks his promise to come and get them to go back to the U.S. together, and his mother is disappointed, yet again, after she had prepared a magnificent celebration. Yuniór's outrage at the unfair situation is to be expected:

First Mami tried slapping me quiet but that did little. Then she locked me in my room where my brother told me to cool it but I shook my head and screamed louder. I was inconsolable. I learned to tear my clothes because this was the one thing I had whose destruction hurt my mother. She took all the shirts from my room, left me only with shorts which were hard to damage with bare fingers. I pulled a nail from our wall and punched a dozen holes in each pair, until Rafa cuffed me and said, Enough, you little puto. (p. 65)

The two chapters focalized through the innocent eyes of the nine-year-old narrator are packed with moving moments when we see him suffering due to his elder brother's arrogance and lack of sympathy, his mother's unbearable affliction and near-madness, and poor Ysraél's constant harassment at the hands of other kids. It is no wonder that, as several critics (Frydman 2007; Rodríguez 2007) have argued, the origin of Yuniór's neurosis and anti-social behavior as an adolescent can already be traced to these early years in Santo Domingo, years plagued by uncertainty, anxiety, and lack of affection.

On the other hand, interspersed between those moments of bafflement and deprivation he undergoes as a result of his brother's rejection, his Abuelo's inattention or his mother's despair, we also hear a confident voice which represents a counterpoint bringing to the fore those aspects of his childhood years that have helped him to become the person he is now. Curiously, this alternative discursive presence is likely to stress those elements of the child's experience that the latter habitually underplays or disregards altogether on account of his most immediate concerns. Thus, for example, when Yuniór considers his mother's behavior while her husband is away -Papi repeatedly proves incapable of fulfilling his responsibilities as a *pater familias*-, he reveals a tendency to hyperbolize Mami's fidelity and her respect for both her children and herself:

Mami came home after sunset, just when the day's worth of drinking was starting to turn some of the neighbors wild. Our barrio was not the safest of places and Mami usually asked one of her co-workers to accompany her home. These men were young, and some of them were even unmarried. Mami let them walk her but she never invited them into the house. She barred the door with her arm while she said good-bye, just to show them that nobody was getting in. Mami might have been skinny, a bad thing on the Island, but she was smart and funny and that's hard to find anywhere. Men were drawn to her. (p. 56)

It is difficult to believe that this passage, with its undercurrents of class consciousness and sexual connotations, could have originated in the still pre-mature mind of young Yuniór. More likely, it is the older author's assessment of this strong character's principles and behavior that



gives shape to the narrative discourse at this stage. An even clearer example of this inflating propensity on the part of the narrating subject can be observed when, near the end of “Aguantando,” and after his mother has been away for some weeks trying to recover from her husband’s latest betrayal, she decides to take a Sunday off in order to invite the whole family to the movies: “Mami looked beautiful and many of the men she passed wanted to know where she was heading. We couldn’t afford it but she paid for a movie anyway. *The Five Deadly Venoms*. Kung-Fu movies were the only ones the theaters played those days” (p. 67).

In a similar vein, Díaz completely changes our perception of Ysrael in the story “No Face”, for the grotesque boy is now presented under the guise of a superhero: “He runs past his tío’s land and with a glance he knows how many beans of café his tío has growing red, black and green on his *conucos*. He runs past the water hose and the pasture, and then he says FLIGHT and jumps up and his shadow knifes over the tops of the trees...” (p. 117). The reader becomes soon aware that part of this narrative trick is achieved by granting Ysrael himself the opportunity to tell some of his own adventures. As it seems, the narrator has learned to empathize with and see the world through the eyes of a character that he had helped his elder brother to chase and maltreat in the opening chapter of the collection. Nevertheless, this fact does not save the faceless boy from being ambushed and beaten up by the cruel youngsters in the neighborhood.<sup>17</sup> Nor is he too sure that Padre Lou’s comforting words about the surgery he will receive in Canada are to be fully trusted:

He nods but doesn’t know what he should think. He’s scared of the operations and scared that nothing will change, that the Canadian doctors will fail like the santeras his mother hired, who called every spirit in the celestial directory for help. The room he’s in is hot and dim and dusty and he’s sweating and wishes he could lie under a table where no one can see. (p. 122)

Still, it can hardly be disputed that this displacement in viewpoint speaks of a deeper understanding of the abused boy’s psychology and of his potential to outrun even those who try to keep him a captive of his condition -as his own father does- on a daily basis. The closing sentences of the story are quite explicit in this regard: “He runs, down towards town, never slipping or stumbling. Nobody’s faster” (p. 123). It is difficult to believe that Yunion, despite his special sensibility, has developed in this short time the imaginative skills to present this character in such a different light. I would argue, instead, that it is probably the older, more mature version of himself as an artist living elsewhere who is employing this character and his circumstances to tell us something about his own identity and its progressive formation. In my view, Díaz uses these episodes from his Dominican childhood to project onto those characters and incidents an understanding of ethnic difference and of his “doubleness” which he can only have acquired much later in his life. I would agree in this sense with Sollors (1989: xv) when he states that “the effect of authenticity” that ethnic writers seek “is achieved not by some purist, archival, or preservationist attitude toward a fixed past but by a remarkable openness toward the ability of a specific idiom to interact with ‘outside’ signals and to incorporate them.” This is the main reason why the auto-ethnographical narratives by these bicultural authors are not so different from Franklin’s or Jefferson’s who, after deciding what sort of individuality and society their self-narratives should produce, also searched in their past for those events that would best serve their purposes.<sup>18</sup> Spengemann (1980: 11) is

therefore correct in pointing out that “events from the life are chosen for their suitability as illustrations of the narrator’s pronouncements or as topics of exegesis.” The reader should not be surprised that works such as *Drown* or *¡Yo!* are full of the kind of exaggerations and understatements that blur the dividing line between the experiences and attitudes of the children they once were in the D.R. and the ethnic artists they have become in another country. While we are surely made to feel great sympathy for young Yunior, who faces all kinds of ordeals during his terribly difficult childhood to find his space in North America, we realize that he has also been provided with some hints that should help him to escape from his underprivileged condition and integrate into the broader U.S. society.<sup>19</sup>

### Hybrid Subjectivities: Nostalgic Memories and Cultural Critique

According to some specialists (Couser 1979; Durczak 1999), ethnic self-writing usually looks back upon the personal experiences of the narrator through mostly favorable eyes, since those experiences should somehow foreshadow the complex subjectivity that s/he eventually forges.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, while it is true that many of Álvarez’s memories of her early life on the island retrieve some of the most captivating aspects of her cultural mythology, family heritage, and community lifestyle, it should also be admitted that a number of ugly features of her homeland are likewise represented. In general, just as the Dominican customs and traditions that have helped her in her self-formation process are romanticized almost beyond recognition -at least, to anyone minimally familiar with those “ethnic” materials-, so are those other unpleasant cultural remembrances inflated in the opposite direction. In this sense, it is not surprising that some of the most widely-read women autobiographers of our times -Maxine H. Kingston or Maya Angelou, for example- should have been accused of representing a highly biased version of their ancestors’ culture; after all, they usually choose from it those elements that they most eagerly wish to praise and repudiate.<sup>21</sup> Álvarez is no exception to this rule, and her handling of topics such as Trujillo’s dictatorship, the sexual politics on the island, or the superstitious beliefs held by many Dominicans (see the chapters “The Mother” or “The Caretakers”) make her position quite clear:

All her life María had been mounted by the santos, so that people always came to her with their problems and hopes and fears, and she procured for them the help of the spirit world. The santos would descend on her shoulders, and trembling all over, her eyes rolling as if they were marbles inside her head, María would speak in a voice not her own [...] But after her boy drowned, the santos stopped speaking to María. (p. 115)

These chapters in *¡Yo!* bring the protagonist, Yolanda García, back to her country of origin, where she has to face some traumatic childhood experiences or new insights into her motherland that are little short of terrifying. “The Mother” -which is told by Yo’s own mother- concentrates on the excruciating fears that the family had to learn to live with before they abandoned their country. Although the writer tries to mitigate some of those fears by the inclusion of a number of conceptual metaphors and metafictional devices, still it is evident that Álvarez wants to preserve a great deal of the rawness of those awful feelings so as to give

them a prominent role in her “formation”.<sup>22</sup> In the passage below from this chapter, her fictional mother is shown considering how strong the powers Yolanda herself has as a storyteller -and somebody who untimely learnt about her father’s secret political activities- are:

Isn’t a story a charm? All you have to say is, *And then we came to the United States*, and with that *and then*, you skip over four more years of disappearing friends, sleepless nights, house arrests, narrow escape, *and then*, you’ve got two adults and four wired-up kids in a small, dark apartment near Columbia University. Yo must have kept her mouth shut or no charm would have worked to get us free of the torture chambers we kept telling the immigration people about so they wouldn’t send us back. (italics in the original, p. 28)

This short excerpt succeeds in raising our consciousness of the huge possibilities self-writers have to work on their personal experiences in the way they think best to their ultimate purposes. In this case, by simply shifting the role of the narrator to her fictional mother, she manages to highlight two essential, and somehow antagonistic, constituents of her auto-ethnography: on the one hand, there is her power to reconstruct her memories of the past to be able to gain control over the most painful episodes and, on the other, we see her commitment to giving voice to those events that have left an indelible mark on her way of reading reality later. Smith (1987: 44) remarks concerning this twofold strategy in female self-writers that “there have always been women who cross the line between private and public utterance, unmasking their desire for the empowering self-interpretation of autobiography as they unmasked in their life the desire for publicity.” No need to explain that the meiotic references to “homes raided, people hauled off, torture chambers, electric prods, attacks by dogs, fingernails pulled out” (p. 32) in this chapter have the effect of making the reader aware of the kind of trials and tribulations she has had to overcome in order to be able to reach a full and in-depth understanding of her hybrid subjectivity.<sup>23</sup>

But if Díaz’s and Álvarez’s performances as bicultural self-writers may make us wonder sometimes about the degree of authenticity in their auto-ethnographical works, something similar could also be said about their attempts to open and democratize their fiction. Like many other Latino/a writers, they seem convinced that writers can achieve the desired standards of pluralism and diversity only if they permit the voices of “those damaged souls that need to be listened to and [who] were all terrified of and are running away from” (Requa, 1995: 5) to be heard. In this regard, it is not surprising that one of these authors’ best-loved American writers should be Walt Whitman, who for them epitomizes all the expansiveness and inclusiveness that they would like to have in their own narratives. As has been noted earlier on, both *¡Yo!* and *Drown* explicitly show the writers’ intention to have a variety of discourses represented in their texts: in one case, through the use of multiple points of view and, in the other, by letting the reader get to know in more depth some of the characters that have played a key role in Yuniór’s later life (“Aurora,” “Boyfriend,” and “Negocios”). Álvarez’s and Díaz’s masterful portrayal of this gallery of voices and personalities has often been praised, as has also their ability to connect those figures with particular social contexts, historical moments, and *weltanschauungs*.<sup>24</sup> In Stefanko’s (1996: 51) opinion, Álvarez’s multi-perspectival and polyphonic experiments in self-writing introduce a “mode of crossing

the threshold into the anomalous, impure, and unstable [which] enables the reader and writer to participate in the breaking down of constructed, pure boundaries and to engage in complex and heterogeneous dialogues.” Similarly, *Drown* has been described as a “performative narrative that creates a unique dynamics which keeps the reader from searching for an absolute truth [...] and, instead, encourages him/her to acquire the methods to come to an approximate idea of what reality is” (Barros-Grela, 2007: 17).

Evidently, then, in allowing those other minds and voices to express their views in their works, both writers manage to give a more complex and holistic character to the process of finding their particular niche in the Dominican-American community.<sup>25</sup> What Latino/a literary scholars often fail to recognize is that this Whitmanesque dimension in the authors of their devotion sometimes obscures another aspect which may not seem so positive, but is still quite common in the tradition of American self-narratives. Even if it is evident that their texts are more open to multiple voices, those voices seem to be significantly constrained by an implied necessity to rely on and to refer to the writers’ alter ego in the work in order to create a sense of their selfhood. This definitely seems to be the case in the character of Aurora in Díaz’s collection or Yo’s Dominican cousin in Álvarez’s postmodern self-narrative:

Don’t think I don’t know what the García girls used to say about us island cousins. That we were Latin American Barbie dolls, that all we cared about was our hair and nails, that we had size-three souls. I don’t deny I looked around me once I was trapped here for the rest of my life. (36)

[....]

Wife, mother, career girl -I’ve managed them all- and that’s not easy in our *third world* country. Meanwhile the García girls struggle with their either-or’s in the land of milk and money. (italics in original, p. 52)

In this passage, it seems clear that it is Yolanda’s cousin who gets the upper hand in her dialectics with the central character. Nevertheless, it would be naïve not to see that this character’s story only gains its ultimate significance as one other piece in the puzzle in which the author is trying to produce her second self. As is often the case in Whitman’s poetry, then, there is an element of the jeremiad myth in these works, since the authors also see themselves as pariahs and social misfits; they are rebels speaking in the desert for the renewal of a dream concerning both their history and, primarily, their future.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, Olney (1972) was probably right when in his volume *Metaphors of the Self* he claimed that most autobiographies written in North America find their roots in the pre- birth and initial stages of the nation. This may seem paradoxical in the case of authors who have been born in other parts of the globe but, like Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur, it is not unusual to hear them refer to the regenerative power of their Americanization (Cf. Sayre, 1964; Sollors, 1989).

### Concluding Remarks

To sum up, my discussion of these two fictional auto-ethnographies by two Dominican-American writers should have made clear that, despite their outstanding contributions to an expansion of the boundaries of the genre, there are still a number of ways in which they are

profoundly indebted to the classics in this tradition. Their renovation of the conventional frames of self-narratives becomes most conspicuous when they have to search for their bicultural identity, revisit traumatic memories from their past or feel compelled to represent perspectives and views other than their own. In regard to these difficult challenges, Adams (1990: 11) explains that “all autobiographers are in a sense self-conscious, characteristically asking as they start, why they are writing about themselves and why they have chosen autobiography over another form, and often questioning their own veracity.” This last point seems particularly critical because, as my article hopes to have demonstrated, bicultural self-writers are more than likely to rescue -and re-invent imaginatively- those experiences that they believe are going to help their readers understand their condition in the best possible light. As a matter of fact, if Durczak (1999: 20) is right, for most hyphenated authors “the act of writing autobiography is often a final act in their struggle for acceptance, recognition and success in the adopted country”. My discussion of Álvarez’s and Díaz’s self-portrayals has shown that they are not unfamiliar with some of the techniques used in the genre to reconcile the events of their lives with some of their ideals as public figures and artists. In order to do so, they rely on both memory and imagination. Whether this combination of the historical and the fictional is viewed as a strength or a weakness in their self-narratives depends very much on the expectations their readers, specialized critics, and they themselves have concerning the role they should be playing in the transformation of North American literary history.

## Notes

1. A first draft of this article was presented as a paper at the Conference “Borders, Identity, Liminality” held at the Universidad of Castilla-La Mancha in November 2001. That original paper dealt only with the autobiographical writings of Julia Álvarez, but I was very fortunate to receive a number of illuminating comments and suggestions from the audience that encouraged me to write this contribution.

2. I believe that it is these constraints that Junot Díaz had in mind when he chose Gustavo Pérez-Firmat’s lines in a poem as an epigraph for his collection of short stories *Drown*: “The fact that I am writing to you in English already falsifies what I wanted to tell you. My subject: how to explain to you that I don’t belong to English though I belong nowhere else.” See also Jane Tompkins’s “Me and My Shadow,” especially pp. 30-31.

3. For some highly illuminating disquisitions on the concept and effects of the “pacte autobiographique” (autobiographical contract), see Philippe Lejeune’s *On Autobiography*.

4. Although both authors could be classified as belonging to the “first-and-a-half generation” (Pérez-Firmat), for both spent their early years in the Dominican Republic, it is also notorious that questions of class and ideology separate them quite distinctively.

5. See, for instance, Cindy L. Rodríguez’s “Masculinities in Contemporary Latino Fiction” or Jacqueline Stefanko’s “New Ways of Telling: Latinas’ Narratives of Exile and Return.”

6. Díaz acknowledged this fact in an interview with Céspedes and Torres-Saillant: “I have multiple traditions, like anyone else. I’m part of the mainstream of ‘American’ literary tradition [...]” (2000: 904).

7. See Durczak’s “Introduction” to *Selves Between Cultures*. This specialist believes that many recent immigrant and ethnic self-writers “have tried to praise the same values that the ‘Fathers of

American autobiography' [...]" (1999: 12).

8. Arnold Krupat, for example, underlines this point in several sections of *For those Who Come After: A Study of American Indian Autobiography*.

9. Auto-ethnographies are a type of autobiographical writing that uses the writer's personal experiences to gain a deeper understanding of a group's culture. As opposed to ethnography, which employs qualitative scientific research methods, here the researcher becomes the primary subject/object of the research. See Reed-Danahay's (1997: 1-17) "Introduction" to *Auto/Ethnography* or Mary L. Pratt's excellent work on transculturation and this literary sub-genre in *Imperial Eyes*.

10. Very likely, the critics that have contributed most decisively to this refashioning and revision of autobiographical narratives are the French post-structuralists: Barthes, Derrida, and De Man, primarily. For all of them, the referential basis of self-writing is inherently unstable, it is a pure illusion produced by the rhetorical structure of language.

11. See Reed-Danahay (1997: 2-4). As this critic explains, "[autoethnography] synthesizes both a postmodern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question." (p. 2)

12. This is, no doubt, one of the most widely-accepted defining features of some of the classic examples of North American autobiography. See Robert F. Sayre's discussion of Benjamin Franklin's autobiography in *The Examined Self*.

13. Weintraub substantiates his analysis with references to and examples from the autobiographical works of Goethe, Rousseau, and Benjamin Franklin. As he states, a hallmark of all these self-narratives is that they are "written from a specific retrospective point of view, the place at which the author stands in relation to his cumulative experience when he puts interpretative meaning on his past" (1978: xviii).

14. Buss (1991: 106) speaks of the coexistence of two subjects in these writers. She remarks on this point that "the purpose of this strategy is not to erase the dominated subject before a triumphantly stable and dominant self, but rather to hold two positions in tension with one another, to recognize the importance of both processes in self-formation."

15. The list of books which have taken part in what is often called the "culture wars" would be far too long to include here, but just to give a couple of examples from each of the contending parties, one could refer to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *Disuniting America* and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education*, on the one hand, and Lawrence Levine's *Opening of the American Mind* and Henry L. Gates' *Loose Canons*, on the other.

16. For an excellent discussion of *Drown* in this light, see chapter 3 in Danny Méndez's thesis "In Zones of Contact (combat): Dominican Narratives of Migration and Displacements in the US and Puerto Rico".

17. Although Adams (1990: 8-9) and others have spoken very highly of the "inventive/fictive qualities of contemporary autobiographies," it is clear that bicultural writers are also intent on preserving a high level of historical verisimilitude that would make their stories ring true to the circumstances.

18. Robert F. Sayre's *The Examined Self* remains one of the most illuminating analyses of some of these classic autobiographical works. Sayre (1964: 33) relates the emergence of the genre to the constitution of the U.S. as a political entity: "[...] as a designated and conscious genre it fell within the early years of the Republic, and its growth, [...] also coincided with the growth of the U.S."

19. About this issue, Buss (1991: 101) notes that "the resolutions which these autobiographers offer to their adolescent identity crises have all the markings of 'unfinished crises,' in which as adults they seek some conditional union between their split selves."

20. Whether this statement is true about Díaz's collection is more than arguable because the voice

of the “I” narrator still retains much of the uncertainty and disorientation that governed his experiences in the past both on the island and, then, in New Jersey.

21. Buss refers in her article “Reading for the Double Discourse” to some of the critical essays on Kingston’s and Angelou’s autobiographical pieces that have raised these kinds of accusations. Rigoberta Menchú’s memoirs have also been the target of severe criticism for that same reason.

22. See McCracken’s essay on Álvarez’s postmodern self. She (2002: 226) holds that the book “gestates a new selfhood” as Yo accumulates different significations during those trying experiences: “We experience the family’s fear of the eroding border between the public and the private, truth and lies, and the original and the copy when the story itself draws us into the slippery relation between reality and its simulacra.”

23. According to Spengemann (1980: 167), what characterizes the latest self-narratives is not the inclusion of bio data “but their efforts to discover, through a fictive action, some ground upon which conflicting aspects of the writer’s own nature might be reconciled in complete being.”

24. See Weintraub (1978: 377), where this historian argues that the main tensions and inner dramatics in modern autobiographies occur when men and women try “to coordinate the claims of such diverse [public] callings for their selves with their wish to cultivate a specific individuality [...]”

25. Durczak (1999: 184) examines in great detail the intricate forms of these bicultural autobiographies. He concludes that, for hyphenated writers, “living between two cultures is an intellectually complex process which requires equally complex narrative strategies and decisions.”

26. See Berkovitch’s *The American Jeremiad*, especially pp. 178-81. In Berkovitch’s (1978: 180) opinion, “American writers have tended to see themselves as outcasts and isolates, prophets crying in the wilderness. So they have been, as a rule, American Jeremiahs simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating a national dream.”

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